

WHO REPRESENTS YOU?

CONVERSATION GUIDE FOR FACILITATORS

ASK **BIG**
QUESTIONS

Hillel
International

Note for Facilitators: This document is designed to be the centering point for a group conversation. You should plan for the conversation to last between 60 and 90 minutes, depending on group size. Most parts are meant to be read by members of the group, so you should plan to ask participants to take turns reading sections. Alternatively, you can choose the first reader of a section, and then that reader chooses the next reader. Additional guidelines and suggestions for planning and leading a successful conversation can be found at the end of this guide.

Note: This guide is part of Hillel's initiative to promote deeper conversations about inclusion and diversity. We hope that it prompts some powerful thoughts and reflections about how we can be more open and welcoming as individuals and as a community.

WELCOME

Before we begin, we need to agree on a few things:

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- Our aim is to create a space where we can understand others and understand ourselves, not to give advice or to argue ideas of objective truth. With that in mind, in this conversation we will agree to speak in the first-person, about our own truth.
- We will assume good faith in one another.
- We will open ourselves to listen and learn from one another.
- We won't rush to fill the silence.

Can we all agree to these things? If you feel, for whatever reason, that you cannot agree to these things, then please take this opportunity to exit. By staying in the circle, we all signify our intention to abide by these commitments.

ASK & SHARE

Let's take a moment to introduce ourselves. Please share your name and the name of a person you feel represents you well. It can be a family member, someone from your community, in government, in your religious tradition, or someone else entirely. You can use the space below to make some notes to yourself.

Note for Facilitators: Give people a moment to organize their thoughts before you start asking for volunteers. It may be helpful to model this introduction for participants, so consider introducing yourself first. Be sure everyone states their name. You don't need to go in order around a circle. Allow people to introduce themselves when the spirit moves them.

LEARN

The word “represent” is defined as, “to be entitled or appointed to act or speak for (someone), especially in an official capacity.” We certainly have representatives in government, those who are elected to make decisions on our behalf—to establish laws, render judicial decisions, create or dismantle governmental programs and even decide if we should go to war. We hope, when we elect leaders, that they will represent the people that they serve fairly and accurately.

But we are represented in all sorts of ways. Loved ones represent us all the time, from the informal—“I trust you to pick out a gift for Aunt Flo from us both”—to the more formal, like drawing up a legal document for our interests to be represented in the event that we become incapacitated. Other people may serve in an official capacity in an organization, place of work or school with which we are affiliated, and make decisions on behalf of that place that may or may not represent our own wishes.

Elana Maryles Sztokman, a scholar and author of several books on gender issues in Orthodox Judaism, wrote the following essay, “Who Represents Me?” about her relationship to traditional forms of representation in her religious tradition. Please read it together as a group.

When I think about who represents me, one of the strongest images that comes to mind is the “Shaliach Tzibur.” A “shaliach tzibur,” literally a representative of the general public, is effectively the cantor in synagogue. The shaliach tzibur, who is charged with leading services, is often a mix of opera singer and scholar, a master of hundreds of pages of liturgy accumulated over dozens of generations, a professional crowd-manager and entertainer, one who talks to God while keeping an entire congregation moved and motivated, and quite possibly entertained. The shaliach tzibur is most revered when the music is both uplifting and swift, engaging enough to be evocative but quick enough to get everyone to the Kiddush [the post-service blessings and snacks] on time.

In my life growing up in modern Orthodox Brooklyn, the shaliach tzibur was always a man – often my father, actually. My grandfather, David Maryles, z”l, was a cantor in Williamsburg in the 1930 who died at the age of 39 when my father was just shy of his bar mitzvah. My father, the oldest of five brothers, often describes singing in his father’s choir in synagogues around New York and the Catskills. The role of shaliach tzibur was passed on to him prematurely as a centerpiece of Jewish manhood, and my father spent his teenage years as a paid shaliach tzibur and Torah reader, jobs that enabled him to help support his orphaned family. These were formative experiences for him, completely shaping his Jewish identity for many decades to come.

For me, as one of four daughters observing my father’s role as shaliach tzibur from the women’s section in the synagogue, this transmission of the heritage was both intimate and completely out of reach. It was a Jewish identity lived vicariously, as the “daughter-of” or “granddaughter-of” or later “wife-of” and “mother-of.” The men and boys in my life could take on the role of praying on my behalf. They were respected and revered for that—especially my father—and I, as one of the flanking females, was meant to feel, well, represented. I was meant to feel that, as a member of the community, the shaliach tzibur spoke to God for me, and that all was good.

But at a certain point in my life, that stopped working for me. The words that often came out of the mouths of leading men in the Orthodox community stopped resonating for me. The many rationales I heard about my place behind the partition – why women do not lead services, cannot be rabbis, or do not count in a minyan [quorum for prayer]– did not feel like my own. At a certain point, the entire service stopped feeling like mine. Sitting behind the partition is just not the same thing as sitting in the actual sanctuary. Sure, many women are fine with it, perhaps even happy in their quiet corner. I was like that for many years, too. Until I started paying attention to myself, listening to my inner voice, and talking back to the culture that I was brought up with.

So the shaliach tzibur stopped representing me. Orthodox rabbis stopped representing me. In fact, what I've learned is that when I talk to my Creator, the only one who can really represent me is me. Even the prayerbook does not always represent me. Certainly the book of Psalms has some texts that match many profound human moments of spiritual seeking and connection. There are times when I find much comfort in words written by others even thousands of years ago. But for the most part, when I want to talk to God, I do it myself, without any intervention or mediation of others. If God is going to listen to what is in my heart, I have to be able to express that myself and not rely on anyone else to do it for me. I am the only one who knows my truth, and nobody else can speak that truth for me.

Learning how to listen to myself and speak for myself has been a vital lesson not only in synagogue but beyond. It has implications for the workplace, for social relationships, and for politics. We cannot always rely on others to know what we are thinking or feeling. We need to speak out about what is on our minds and in our hearts, otherwise people will never know.

I think that this is an especially important lesson for women, especially those who, like me, were brought up expecting men to speak on our behalf. I still attend many events where men do all the formal talking. I've been to countless bar mitzvahs and engagement parties where the speakers are all men, where the father of the bar mitzvah boy makes a long and elaborate speech "on behalf of my wife and myself." This model does not work for me anymore. Wherever I go, I try to encourage women to speak on their own behalf, to not let anyone speak for them or try to represent them. Our voices are our identity, our power, and our connection to God.

So who represents me? Just me. I represent me.

As we reflect on this text, here are a few questions to consider:

Interpretive Questions

- Why did Sztokman stop feeling that the shaliach tzibbur represented her?
- What does she mean when she says, "In fact, what I've learned is that when I talk to my Creator, the only one who can really represent me is me"?
- How does that statement impact her vision of Judaism?

Reflective Questions

- How do you see yourself represented—or not represented—in various aspects of your life? How does that impact you?
- When have you felt like someone represented you in a way that didn't accord with your values?
- In what ways do you feel represented well in and by the Jewish community? In what ways not?
- What qualities are most important in someone who represents you in some way?
- In what situations do you feel that the only one who can really represent you is you?

Use the space below to write some notes to yourself.

Note for Facilitators: This is the heart of the conversation. Give people several minutes to prepare their thoughts. Then invite people to divide into pairs or triads and share their responses. Give them a good amount of time for this—10-20 minutes. It may be longer, depending on how much momentum they develop. Then reconvene in the large group and ask people to share from their small-group conversations.

A few tips on facilitation:

- The large-group debrief should take another 20-30 minutes.
- Begin by asking for a volunteer to share an insight from their conversation. You might begin by asking, "What came up?"
- When each person is done, thank them for their comment.
- Don't feel a need to rush or to fill silences.
- If someone begins to monopolize the time, you might say, "I want to be sure that everyone has a chance to speak, so let's try to make room for another person."

For other ideas on facilitation, please refer to the AIR-IT guide at the end of this document. When you sense that the group has finished sharing its responses to these questions, invite people to share any further insights or reflections from the conversation, before moving to the conclusion.

DO

Whether or not we feel that we are fairly represented in various contexts, by various people, we are represented by others, in a myriad of ways, every day. And we represent ourselves, and perhaps others, in different ways over the course of our lives as well.

As we close this conversation today, please consider a few more questions:

- What did you learn today?
- How does this conversation impact your thinking around the value of inclusion in your Jewish community?
- What is one change that you want to make based on this conversation?
- What's one obstacle that might get in the way of you making that change? How can you overcome that obstacle? Who can help you get there?

Feel free to use the space below to write some notes to yourself.

Note for Facilitators: Give people a minute to reflect on the question. Then ask anyone who wants to share to do so. When you sense that the group has finished sharing its response to this question, invite people to share any further insights or reflections from the conversation, before moving to the conclusion.

AIR-IT: A GUIDE TO FACILITATING CONVERSATION

A: ASK BIG QUESTIONS.

BIG QUESTION	HARD QUESTION
Anyone can answer it. Example: "For whom are we responsible?"	Experts will answer it best. Example: "What's the best economic policy for the United States?"
Focuses on wisdom and experience. Example: "What's the best advice you've ever received?"	Focuses on intelligence and skill. Example: "Are human beings naturally good or evil?"
Uses plain language.	Uses technical language.
Directed at a subject (me, you, us). Example: "What could we sacrifice to change the world?"	Directed at an object (it). Example: "Is it better to cut spending or raise taxes to balance the federal budget?"
Opens up space and invites people in as participants.	Closes space and leads people to feel like spectators.
Leads to sharing personal stories.	Leads to debates about truth claims.
Emphasizes a both/and approach.	Emphasizes an either/or approach.

I: INVITE PERSONAL STORIES.

Big questions lead to sharing personal stories. The facilitator acts to support this by:

- Creating the space (physical, intellectual, emotional, spiritual) of trust in which these stories can be shared and honored.
- Weaving: Summarize, reflect back, and keep the stories and observations tethered to the big question. This helps the group to maintain integrity and not feel that it is fragmenting or fraying.

R: REALLY LISTEN.

Ask Big Questions conversations are marked by real listening. The facilitator's reflecting back and weaving is crucial to this. Participants should be able to answer questions like: "What did so-and-so say? What do you think they meant when they said it? What did it evoke in you?"

IT: USE INTERPRETIVE THINGS.

Ask Big Questions conversations often use a text, poem, artwork, song, natural object or other “interpretive thing” to help center the conversation and create a common point of access for all participants.

QUESTIONS TO ASK WHEN PREPARING FOR A DISCUSSION

Where?

- Does the place where you’re having the conversation create a space in which people can feel safe?
- Is it a closed space? Does it have a door you can close to ensure privacy and confidentiality when needed?
- What can you do to make the space visually appealing or lovely? Does it have windows to let in light? Do you want to play some music?
- Can everyone sit comfortably in a circle?

When?

- Are you scheduling the conversation at a time when everyone can be physically awake and present?
- Will people be hungry? Will you provide food or drink?
- Will they be tired or sleepy after a meal?
- How long will the conversation be?
- How will you break up the time if necessary?

Who and How?

- How many people will participate? Will there be enough to sustain diverse conversation? Will there be too many to keep the conversation centered?
- How will you get the word out and then remind people?
- Do you need to make any special arrangements for people with special needs (i.e. physical disabilities)?
- Greetings – Who will welcome people to the conversation and how will they do it?
- How will you have everyone introduce themselves? (Big Questions are great for introductions!)
- How will you close the conversation?
- How will you follow up with people?
- How will you capture their contact information?

What About You?

- What will you do to get yourself ready?

Thank you for being part of this conversation. Please share this conversation guide with others in your community. And join our conversation online at AskBigQuestions.org.

Hillel Ask Big Questions is an initiative of Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life in partnership with the Einhorn Family Charitable Trust. Visit AskBigQuestions.org to answer questions, learn from others, and join the movement.

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